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SUBJECT: RUSSIAN MILITARY PERFORMANCE IN GEORGIA CRITICIZED

Classified By: Pol. Minister Counselor Alice G. Wells. Reasons 1.4 (b), (d).

11. (C) Summary. Several of Moscow's leading military analysts offered mixed assessments of Russia's military performance in Georgia. Although many praised the Russian Armed Forces' (RAF) quick response to Georgian aggression and its decision to strike targets inside Georgian territory, allowing Russia to overwhelm and inspire fear among Georgian forces, they focused equal, if not more, attention on Russian military shortcomings. Arguing that Russia fought like "it was in the stone age," some castigated the RAF's use of antiquated equipment, an overreliance on heavy air bombers for questionable purposes, and poor intelligence. The Russian leadership picked up on this, too. President Medvedev already declared that the Russian military's weapons should not be worse than the weapons supplied by the U.S. and NATO to Georgia, and ordered the MOD to develop its weapons program to meet these standards. End Summary.

RAF Response to Georgian Aggression Fast...and Slow

12. (C) The official assessment of the RAF's performance in the conflict in South Ossetia was predictable, with the President praising the RAF for having "excellent military training," emerging from its deplorable state during the 1990s, and being capable of defending the "life and worth of Russia's citizens." Medvedev noted in particular the RAF's quick, effective, and severe response. Experts' assessments were not quite as rosy, but several agreed that the RAF responded reasonably well after the Georgians invaded South Ossetia. Deputy Editor in Chief of the "Weekly Journal" Aleksandr Golts claimed that, in comparison to the RAF's blundering attempts to mobilize large numbers of troops and perform large-scale maneuvers during the First and Second Chechen Wars, the RAF achieved an "amazing result" this time by launching its own successful military engagement only twelve hours after Georgia opened fire. Viktor Litovkin, Deputy Editor in Chief of the "Independent Military Review," told us that he was surprised the RAF managed to respond in twelve hours, especially considering the large columns of ground forces and tanks that had to navigate very difficult mountain terrain.

13. (C) On the other hand, other experts alleged the RAF could have responded more quickly and more effectively. Litovkin claimed several Russian peacekeepers died in the time it took the military to enter South Ossetia, although he did not blame inaction on Medvedev, who was relaxing on the Volga River when news of the war broke. Rather, he held responsible the archaic military chain of command; despite the fact that the military "knew Georgia would attack" and had been "preparing for Georgia to attack for months," Litovkin argued that the command on the ground had to wait for decision-making to trickle up to the Kremlin before proceeding. Had the command on the ground been authorized to enter South Ossetia immediately after Georgian forces started firing on Russian peacekeepers, Russian and Ossetian lives would have been saved. Golts and retired General Vladimir

Dvorkin of the Center of International Security and the Institute of World Economy and International Relations also cited the absence of a joint command as a glaring weakness in the Russian military that greatly affected the RAF's performance in South Ossetia. Both experts alleged that the ground forces and air forces essentially did not coordinate with one another, which contributed to the RAF's losing men and equipment. Moreover, Dvorkin said the haphazard chain of command inhibited ground forces from assisting the injured Commander of the 58th Army, Anatoliy Khrulyov.

Experts: RAF Targeting Justified

14. (C) Golts observed that the RAF "for the first time mimicked the 'Powell Doctrine,'" and operated on the principle of total military superiority over its opponent. Not only was Russia able to overwhelm the Georgians through sheer numbers of troops, but it also demoralized the Georgians by destroying strategic military targets on Georgian territory. Even the liberal Golts, who attributed the South Ossetian conflict to a failure of Russian foreign policy and diplomacy, justified the RAF's bombings on Georgian territory. He claimed that Russia's bombings prevented Georgian forces from regrouping and deploying reserves, destroyed supply lines, and generally forced the Georgians to retreat in disarray, abandoning their equipment in the process. Litovkin agreed, arguing that Russia limited its targets to "military infrastructure, which is absolutely

necessary in a legitimate war" to destroy enemy capabilities. He asserted that the Russian strategic bombings accomplished their aims, causing the Georgian army to retreat from their positions. Litovkin remarked, "The Georgian forces ran out of Zugdidi and Gori so fast and abandoned their American equipment, giving away your intelligence secrets." As for accusations by the U.S. and Europeans that the RAF had its designs on Tbilisi, Litovkin claimed Russia had no desire to invade the capital and remove Saakashvili, particularly because Russia did not want to kill innocent Georgians in the process.

Equipment and Intelligence Beyond Subpar

15. (C) Experts were not as quick to praise Russia's choice of weapons and criticized RAF's aging military infrastructure. Anatoliy Tsyganok, Director of the Center for Military Prognosis, told us that while Russia's bombings of Georgian sites might have been justified, RAF's use of heavy bombers inflicted unnecessary, additional damage. Golts questioned why strategic bombers, such as the Air Force's TU-22M3, were used for reconnaissance purposes, as the MOD asserted, while Tsyganok and Dvorkin told us they simply did not believe the MOD was telling the truth. Not only do these planes have the capacity to hold multiple tons of bombs, rendering MOD claims of "intelligence missions" highly dubious, but the RAF already has a standard reconnaissance aircraft, the Su-24MR, which is less vulnerable to Georgian air defense systems (one of the TU-22M3s was shot down) and has a higher altitude ceiling than the TU-22M3. Deputy Chief of Russia's General Staff Anatoliy Nogovitsyn even admitted that Russian reconnaissance faced difficulties, and Russia would look into introducing unmanned aerial vehicles in the future. This struck some experts, like Igor Dzhadan of the Agency of Political News and Ruslan Pukhov of the Center for the Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, as "too little, too late." Russia had both the cost and technological expertise to develop unmanned aerial capabilities long before conflict erupted in the Caucasus. Dzhadan criticized the military leadership for its shortsightedness, claiming that the need to use these weapons was about as predictable as "Tuesday arriving after Monday."

16. (C) Pukhov lamented that, "We fought like we were in the Stone Age," and other experts offered similar assessments.

Litovkin could not understand why the RAF used airplanes that the Soviets employed in Afghanistan, when Russia's military-industrial complex had obviously developed since the 1980s. According to Dzhadan, the RAF simply chose to keep its best equipment on the sidelines for the Ossetian conflict. He blasted the military for spending its budget on modernizing "tin cans," such as the 40-year-old T-62 tanks that were sent to South Ossetia, and noted sardonically that the military chose to send its newest generation of tanks to "ceremonial Moscow divisions," rather than to the North Caucasus Military District. Some of these technical disadvantages did not go unnoticed by the Kremlin. Shortly after President Medvedev ended military operations, he stated publicly that Russia's weapons and equipment must not be any worse than its opponents', adding that the U.S. and NATO's supplied Georgia with superior military technology. He ordered the MOD to develop its weapons program to reach the same standards.

17. (C) Several experts were frustrated by the RAF's inability to fight a modern war, and the intelligence services' inability to prepare the military more adequately for the conflict. General Dvorkin called the Ossetian conflict a "war of the 1970s," and said it was "shameful" for a modern army not to employ modern technology, such as air defense, overhead intelligence, and space-based communications. Golts wondered why the RAF did not use radio-electronic warfare against Georgia's air defense systems, which caused Russia to lose several planes. Even more surprisingly, Russian intelligence appeared to completely ignore Georgia's air defense capabilities, as if Russia was unaware that Georgia possessed them or assumed that Tbilisi would not use them. Poor intelligence damaged Russia during the war, but Litovkin and President of the Academy of Military Sciences Makhmut Gareev commented that the intelligence services were equally culpable for not predicting and planning for the extent of Georgian aggression.

Comment

18. (C) Experts may view the RAF's performance in South Ossetia poorly, but no one denies that Russia is capable of pushing around its weaker neighbors using overwhelming military force. Russians have boasted of their victory over an army supplied and trained by the U.S. and European nations, and in the aftermath of the war, Russians maintain confidence in their armed forces. In a poll conducted by the All-Russian Center for the Study of Public Opinion, 83 percent of Russians believe the Russian army is capable of defending the country in the event of a real threat. On the other hand, officials do see a pressing need to upgrade their conventional capabilities and make better use of modern technology for Russia's defense in a larger conflict with NATO or the U.S. End Comment.
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